THREATENED & ENDANGERED SPECIES

Mohr's Barbara Button

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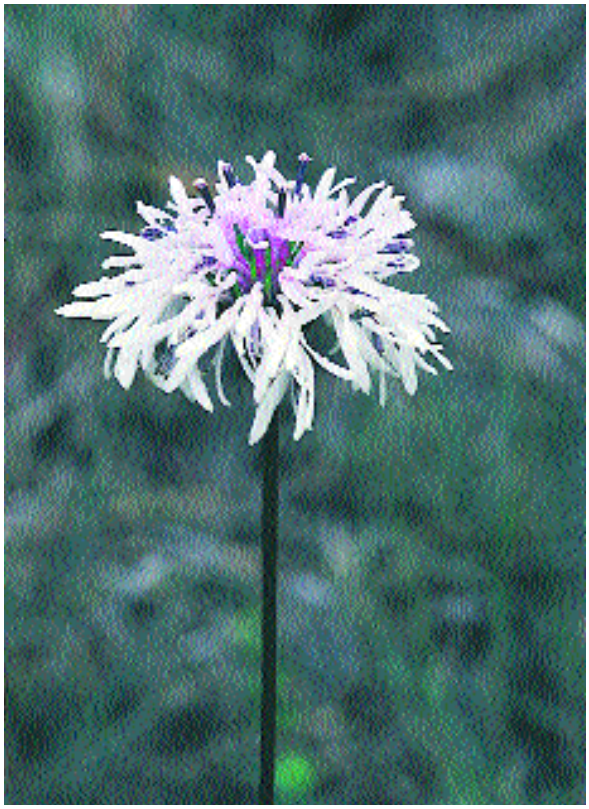
In the early summer of 1882, while surveying for plants near Cullman, Alabama, Dr. Charles Mohr noted an unfamiliar relative of the sunflowers growing among some grasses in a small streamside opening. He promptly collected a sample and stowed it away for identification. Little did he know that his discovery was a species new to science and one of the rarest of all native plants to be found in the Southeast. The species, Mohr's Barbara button (*Marshallia mohrii*), is now listed by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) as threatened.



Named in honor of Dr. Mohr by venerable botanists Chauncey Beadle and Frank Boynton, *Marshallia mohrii* was collected only a few times following Mohr's discovery. For more than 80 years the species remained in relative obscurity with no new populations known from beyond its small range in two north Alabama counties. However, in 1969, Dr. Robert Kral of Vanderbilt University made a startling discovery when he observed the species along a roadside in Cherokee County near the present-day village of Centre. Since then, with an expanded knowledge of habitat preferences and growing patterns the species has been found elsewhere across the region.

Mohr's Barbara button is a narrowly distributed species preferring calcareous glades and marly (wet clay comprised of dissolved limestone) prairies scattered throughout northern Alabama and adjacent Georgia. These plant associations are specialized habitats that support a unique assemblage of flora rarely encountered elsewhere in the state. Although generally dominated by a rich and diverse herbaceous component, these plant communities are often characterized by a sparse occurrence of small trees and shrubs, such as Eastern redcedar, hackberry, glade privet, and Carolina buckthorn. The incidence of periodic droughts and shallow well-drained soils are partially responsible for the scarcity of woody vegetation, but yet is essential for nurturing some of the state's rarest and most cherished plant life. *Marshallia mohrii* is a perennial species able to withstand the harsh often desert-like conditions of these habitats by developing a thick root system capable of storing sufficient reserves of water. During early spring, upon being replenished with winter precipitation, the plants emerge and evolve into an erect herb that produces attractive heads of small pale pink flowers in May and June.

Once commonplace, these glade and prairie systems were scattered upon the landscape across northern Alabama, often occurring as small isolated openings. Today, there are a few remaining examples that have escaped the influence of humanity, many of which have been destroyed by trash disposal, road building, and residential development. One of the finest remaining populations occurs in an open glade complex situated along the Cahaba and Little Cahaba Rivers in Bibb County. The Nature Conservancy has acquired portions of this site and is currently working with adjacent landowners to protect nearby areas. A high degree of endemism, the presence of several rare species, and the decline of these habitats make calcareous glades and marly prairies some of the most botanically unique ecosystems in Alabama. If we are to preserve this species in perpetuity, it is important that we maintain the natural habitat in which Mohr's Barbara button is a part. Only through the long-term commitment toward conservation planning will this species remain a part of Alabama's remarkable natural heritage for generations to come. For further information contact the Alabama Natural Heritage Program of The Nature Conservancy, Huntingdon College, Massey Hall, 1500 East Fairview Avenue, Montgomery, AL 36106.